

# Pourquoi les jeunes tuent-ils ?

Playing for keeps

Youths are killing each other - can they be stopped?

By michele mandel, Toronto Sun, Sat, November 29, 2003

Back in 1995, Dr. Fred Mathews saw the violent writing on the wall. "The problem is bigger than a lot of people want to talk about. I think there's a lot of denial," he said during a Sun panel discussion on youth violence. "We're just rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic if we think conflict resolution and violence-free policies are going to be the answer."

We have hit the iceberg. When we have allegations that three teens ambush a 12-year-old child, beat him with a baseball bat and then stab him repeatedly in the throat, the disaster is here. When it's alleged that a trio of teens deliberately plot to murder an entire family, when schoolmates report the three may have had at least 13 other targets for their murderous rage, then it is finally time to pay attention.

This could have been our Columbine. This could have been our Taber. What would drive kids to kill? And should we be able to see the signs?

Mathews, director of research and program development at Central Toronto Youth Services, has estimated that 75% of kids are never involved in violence; 20% are vulnerable and could resort to violence if they feel adults haven't held perpetrators responsible. The remaining 5% are the very "damaged" -- the mentally ill, the victims of physical or sexual abuse or neglect. They're the ones responsible for the rare youth murders and most of the very serious violent crimes. J. Kevin Cameron believes he can train educators, social workers and police to work together to identify who those potential killers might be. Cameron led the Taber Crisis Response Team after an Alberta student entered his high school with hundreds of rounds of ammunition and opened fire April 28, 1999. Cameron went on to consult with criminal profilers at the FBI and RCMP and helped

develop a threat assessment program, which he is now teaching across the country.

"First you have to know what kinds of kids you're dealing with," he says.

There are two types of violent youth. One is the traditional high-risk kid

who has been violent before and is "pretty high wired" and emotionally

unmoved by resorting to violence again. "We don't see a tremendous behaviour change in the traditional high-risk kid," he says. "They were primed to kill anyways." But there is more chance to stop the violence if they belong to the second group. The non-traditional high-risk youth is emotionally troubled and has focused his anger on his target or targets. Unlike the others, these youth have not been violent before and so few take their threats seriously. Of the young offenders who commit murder, slightly more than 50% had never been seriously violent before.

But, luckily, they are troubled by what they're planning to do and leave

telltale clues that, consciously or subconsciously, are tips to be helped -- and stopped.

Dylan Klebold, one of the two teens who killed 13 at Columbine High School, submitted an extremely violent English paper less than two months before the massacre. "Kids are hoping we'll pick up on it and intervene," Cameron says. If we can recognize the trail of clues, he adds, we can prevent some of these tragedies. Potential warning signs may include things such as verbal threats, or fairly regular drawings or writings with violent themes. "Many kids do it and don't pose a risk to others," Cameron said yesterday from a training session in Vancouver. "Yet we train teams to pay closer attention when kids are doing that to make sure that there aren't other things going on in their lives."

He says the majority of those who make threats never pose a real risk to

their targets, but we should take all threats seriously. "Lessons learned from Columbine and many other sites were that these kids have engaged in significant threat-making behaviour prior to -- sometimes a teacher was aware, sometimes the police had a little info on the kid, often the peers had a lot of info, and yet there was not a formal mechanism to bring the info together.

"We're now training multi-disciplinary teams to actually look at, analyze and respond to information in a much more concerted way, and we know we have prevented some serious attacks in this country." In Brooks, Alta., he says, that training helped stop a former student armed with a fully operational sub-machinegun from going through with his planned mass shooting at the high school's Remembrance Day ceremony this year. The next question is why.

"You take a high-risk kid whose mom or mom and dad are never around," Cameron says. "The kid's basically raising himself in what has become an increasingly violent culture, when you consider TV, movies, the violent video games kids are inundating themselves with. That, without a doubt, is what we call a social dynamic that is contributing to more people feeling justified in behaving violently." Lt.-Col. Dave Grossman, director of the Killology Research Group, is quick to lay the blame on our violent media culture. In his book, "Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill: A Call to Action Against TV, Movie and Video Game Violence" (Random House), Grossman argues that young children are being desensitized by watching gory TV shows and playing violent video games in much the same way new recruits are desensitized by the army to prepare them for battle. He points to a Stanford University study which found a 50% decrease in verbal aggression, and a 40% decrease in physical aggression just by encouraging kids to turn off their TVs and video games.

The families of several victims in the 1999 Columbine massacre have filed a lawsuit against companies that create the violent games and sex-oriented Websites, claiming their products influenced the gunmen. But Eric Harris, the other shooter at Columbine, turned the blame on the adults in his life who failed him -- not on the music or games he played.

"By now, it's over," he wrote in his suicide note. "If you are reading this, my mission is complete ... Your children who have ridiculed me, who have chosen not to accept me, who have treated me like I am not worth their time, are dead. THEY ARE F---KING DEAD ...

"Surely you will try to blame it on the clothes I wear, the music I listen to, or the way I choose to present myself, but no. Do not hide behind my choices. You need to face the fact that this comes as a result of YOUR CHOICES. "Parents and teachers, you f---ked up. You have taught these kids to not accept what is different. YOU ARE IN THE WRONG. I have taken their lives and my own -- but it was your doing. Teachers, parents, LET THIS MASSACRE BE ON YOUR SHOULDERS UNTIL THE DAY YOU DIE."